



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **Justice and Mercy and Faith**

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*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others (Matthew 23:23).*

If you read the whole Bible you know that neither Jesus nor the Old Testament prophets ever seem to mince their words. They don't tailor their message to what the audience wants to hear. They just tell the truth. They say, "This is the way things are," and if the way things are is out of joint and needs to be redeemed, Jesus and the prophets say so.

That way of speaking, that relentless commitment to the truth, wins them a few friends, because in every time and place there are people who really want to know the truth. Even when the truth is hard to hear, some still want to hear it, since they suspect there's a sickness in themselves or in society that needs to be healed. They might even recognize the power of rationalization and complacency to stifle the conscience, and they know they can no more remove those things from their soul than they can operate on their own body to take out a tumor. They need someone to wield the fine blade of truth on their spirit the way a surgeon uses a scalpel to make a body whole.

But after the surgery, when cataracts are removed and they can see more clearly, and when soul-sapping cancers come out and they find new strength for compassion and caring, some people thank the truth-tellers who heal them. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk – and

that's even more true spiritually than physically because the spiritual disabilities are far more common.

There are always some who want to hear the truth because they know that, sooner or later, the truth will make them free. But there are others who desperately try to avoid the truth – or at least the truth about some subjects. They avoid it because truth is a kind of light, and when light shines in darkness it reveals things they'd prefer to keep hidden. As John's gospel says, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

People throw up all sorts of barriers to defend themselves against the truth. The most obvious one is denial. Some simply claim that whatever they don't want to believe is not true. People routinely deny their addictions, for example. "I don't have a problem," they say about their drinking or gambling or pornography or even their shopping, while what they so fervently deny is obvious to everyone else around them.

Denial is popular because it's the cheapest and easiest line of defense against unpleasant truths, both private and public. The RAND Corporation study called *Truth Decay*, which I've used in courses at Carnegie Mellon and in our summer seminar here at Westminster, describes how common it is for people to confuse their personal opinions with the truth, as if whatever they happen to believe settled the matter, just because they believe it.

But of course that's nonsense, isn't it? People frequently believe things that are not true, and fail to believe things that are. Anyone who's ever been mistaken – and I'd

venture to guess that includes every one of us – knows that what we believe and what is true are not necessarily the same.

Denial is so widespread because it's easy and cheap, and people are always inclined to do what brings them the greatest benefit for the lowest cost in the short run. But facts are stubborn things, and denial grows harder to maintain the more reality surrounds and closes in on it. That's why people turn to rationalization and tribalism to reinforce their resistance to potentially threatening truths.

Rationalization knows there might be a problem; otherwise there'd be no need to rationalize. There may seem to be some gap between what I should do and what I actually do, but I tell myself there's a good reason for that gap. A favorite rationalization is the claim that "I had no choice." That's what people tell themselves and others to avoid responsibility for the choices they actually make. The truth is, we almost always have a choice. One choice may be harder, costlier, or more painful than another, but as long as we have free will we always have a choice. War criminals typically say they were just following orders – they had no choice – but the Nuremberg trials saw that defense for the responsibility-denying rationalization that it was. And for crimes against conscience, large or small, an impartial judge always sees through the rationalizations we use to protect ourselves from unpleasant truths.

Tribalism can also be a defense against truth, because we human beings, for all our claims of rugged individualism, are in fact profoundly social creatures. We crave the confirmation and support of other people, and those whose interests align most closely with our own

become the tribes that give us comfort and security. Tribes form most obviously around race and nation and class and party, and the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out almost a century ago how people persist in all sorts of follies and immoralities with their tribes that they would never try to sustain as individuals. Social psychology, not to mention the daily news, constantly reminds us how people will do foolish and harmful things, and believe all sorts of claims that aren't true, as long as it supports their interests and they have the social reinforcement of their party or tribe.

And then there's the hypocrisy that Jesus talks so much about. We all know what hypocrisy is, because we see it so clearly in other people. Hypocrisy claims to believe in certain values, while behaving in ways, or condoning behavior, that belies that very claim. Someone has said that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. And the genius of hypocrisy is that it's so obvious in other people and yet so remarkably invisible in ourselves.

Evolutionary psychologists make a pretty compelling case that hypocrisy is so common because it's functional for both individuals and groups. Hypocrisy's goal is to gain the benefits of *appearing* to be good without having to pay the costs of actually *being* good. For those who want to win at all costs, hypocrisy creates a kind of cynical sweet spot. If you can get others to trust and respect you, then use their trust and respect as a cover to maximize your own interests through power, corruption, or theft, then as long as you rationalize whatever you're doing, you can get away with all sorts of chicanery and evil – at least for a while.

All these are among the reasons why people often avoid the truth and are not very fond of truth-tellers. When

people have an interest in denying the truth, they push back against anyone who tries to proclaim it, and the stronger their interest in denial, the harder they will fight to preserve it.

When it comes to prophets and others who proclaim uncomfortable truths, all sorts of accusations will be hurled against them to undermine both the message and the messenger. In our age of media manipulation and spin-doctoring, when people can get all their information from sources that reinforce their own interests and caricature opponents, it's not hard to discredit inconvenient facts. All of this results in large segments of the population believing some things that are absurdly untrue, while refusing to believe other things that are not only true but important for the well-being of our country and the world.

In extreme cases, when the message itself can't be killed, some who are desperate enough will find a way to kill the messenger. So journalists, for example, are being killed in countries around the world today, some of which are our allies, because they tell the truth that rulers want to hide. And of course, this is not a new phenomenon. In our own country, prophets like Martin Luther King Jr. were killed within the lifetime of many of us here, and two thousand years ago, at the hinge of history, the Son of God himself was put to death by some who felt the need to silence the truth.

But the thing about prophets is, they tell the truth no matter what. "Shout out, do not hold back!" Isaiah declares. True prophets are not intimidated. They care about truth more than they care about their own life, and if they're anything like Jesus, they're committed to telling the truth and working for justice because God cares about those things



too, and in the end they know that God's truth and justice will prevail.

In some churches, when the preacher starts talking about justice, in the sense of social justice and not just putting criminals in jail, there are always those who complain that the preacher has strayed away from religion and wandered into politics. Of course churches should never be partisan, but they can't help being political, in the sense that whatever they say or fail to say often has implications for society. Silence is not necessarily neutrality. Sometimes silence is complicity with injustice, as when churches failed for centuries to speak out against slavery, and for a century after that failed again to speak with one voice against segregation and other forms of discrimination.

When people complain about the church addressing social concerns, they need to read the Bible they claim to believe in. They need to hear Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, who asks in the name of God:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

They need to hear Amos, who gives voice to the words of God: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Or Micah, who asks, "What does the Lord require of you, but

to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

And it isn't just the Old Testament we all need to hear, as if Jesus himself did not quote from the Old Testament as the Word of God, or tell parables like The Sheep and the Goats, or call out the complacent religious folk of his own day:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

There is, of course, a form of religion that calls itself Christian but denies the relevance of faith to the social issues of the day. That religion is widely practiced in America today, but whatever faith that is, it's not biblical Christianity. It's not the faith we learn from Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus says justice and mercy and faith are all interwoven. Comfortable people might prefer charity to justice because charity is often cheaper than justice; but Jesus, like Isaiah, says there is no true worship of God without working for justice in society. Jesus tells us that love and mercy may be more than justice, but they can never be less.

The gospel of Christ has all sorts of implications for society, and the Christian's obligation is to try to understand and tell the truth – even when the truth is hard to hear. I want to spend my last few weeks with you looking more closely at some of the implications that follow from claiming to believe

in the truth Jesus tells us, because these are things we all need to hear.



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